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2018

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Mad dog sews crazy quilt

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by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2018

Acknowledgements

A desperate thank-you to my partner James Cole for his patience and support, both moral and technical. And I am extremely grateful for the guidance, aid, and forbearance of my committee: Jack Stoney, Dan Sutherland, John Yancy, and, in particular, my chair, Sarah Canright. I'd also like to thank Jeff Williams and Amy Haut for their generous help as advisors. Finally, I'd like to express thanks to both the 2017 MFA cohort for their friendship and and the 2018 MFA cohort for their kind adoption of me.

Abstract

Mad dog sews crazy quilt

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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This report concerns itself with a broad range of my work in embroidery and how this work reflects my experience as relates to the perception of the boundaries of body, self, and other. A strange tangle of perceptual disturbances feeds my work. These experiences, pathological or otherwise, drive me to make work that seeks to challenge human exceptionalism and, instead of valorizing the individual, attempts to confuse the boundaries between individuals. The modestly strange situations encountered in my samplers aid our entry to this ambiguous space where we overlap with others in new combinations.

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Introduction

Like some sort of slow, slow drawing, my samplers depict scenarios that are modestly strange; a catalog of circumstances just on the edge of recognition or familiarity. My work in embroidery reflects my experience as relates to the perception of the boundaries of body, self, and other. A strange tangle of perceptual disturbances feeds my work. These experiences, pathological or otherwise, drive me to make work that seeks to challenge human exceptionalism and, instead of valorizing the individual, attempts to confuse the boundaries between individuals. This work owes much to the long history of feminist art and to the almost immeasurably longer saga of prehistoric, historic, and contemporary making of textiles.

Form and Material

HISTORY OF SAMPLERS

My work is comprised of fabric “samplers”, a word that is now a catch-all for many types of stitched work but originally denoted pieces of needlework that displayed a variety of different stitches intended as practice and reference for the sewer. These could take the form of “spot” samplers which were random all-over compositions of different patterns and stitches or, later, the more familiar “marking samplers” that included the alphabet and numerals (doing double duty instructing both needlework and the rudiments of reading). Almost all these American samplers were made by girls and young women and were advertisements for the makers’ presumably virtuous personal qualities and social standing-- the time spent on these pieces, often made by wealthy young women in elite finishing schools, signaled both ample leisure time and disciplined industriousness.

The typical older American samplers are also remarkable for how little they can actually tell us about their maker. We get an item that was labored over for hundreds of hours, but all that we usually have content-wise is a name, date, and some line from the Bible. Even the image and text was likely chosen for the maker by someone else. So the sampler is something that has an incredible amount of accumulated history attached to it just by virtue of being so touched, but that narrative is inaccessible to the contemporary viewer. Museums have thousands of samplers labored over by young women and girls, but usually the only information we actually have about the maker’s life is her name, age, and the year her sampler was completed. There’s just the the barest scaffold of details to try and hang a story on.

[illegible]

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SWADDLING BLANKET TO SHROUD

Samplers are just one example of the larger history of textile production, and, later, fiber art. Fibers are an ancient medium, and the production of fibers has structured the lives (and livelihoods) of people for 20,000 years at a minimum. This work has constituted real and symbolic value for individuals and cultures throughout our entire history. In fact, most of the labor in pre-industrial societies was centered on the production of textiles. Even subsistence-level societies spent time and effort on the decorative aspects of their textiles. Twentieth century artists (such as involved in the Pattern and Decoration movement) sought to reestablish the worth of mediums and styles that had been long considered the domain of women and summarily dismissed.

COMPOSITION

Historical fiber arts lack the authoritative perspective of most art produced for galleries and museums. Quilts, samplers, and other sewing tasks are completed in the lap: worked all over and not composed on an easel with one privileged orientation. I first recognized this aspect of fibers making as a boon when I encountered the “As Essential As Dreams” show of self-taught art at the Menil Collection. Though most of the works were on paper or panel, many of the pieces had the tell-tale patterns of labor that I recognized from my own experience of working a piece in my lap, turning it around and around in order to get my fingers where they needed to be.



Illustration 2: *After this there was a feast of the Jews*, Sister Gertrude Morgan(1960s)

When I work, a small circle of the piece is stretched taut in the embroidery hoop while the rest is concealed in folds. The resulting view is like that of the limited circle of visibility that a flashlight throws in the dark. But in addition to being restricted to a small fraction of the piece, the tight focus means that the orientation of the piece matters less, as the hoop is frequently turned to get the needle better purchase. This approach results in pieces where any element, anywhere in the piece is just as likely to be highly worked, with little regard to any sort of compositional hierarchy.

My acknowledgment of the primacy of this mode of working led me to compositional strategies similar to vernacular forms like bird's eye maps and Shaker drawings, which sometimes show scenes from multiple angles. The resulting pieces often didn't seem to have a consistent orientation. Several of my newer pieces consist of squares dominated by white circles choked with a very high level in detail. The pieces are overhead views of giant rugs with figures scattered around the edges; none of which occupy a privileged position with regard to the spatial orientation of the piece itself. This is atypical of most art that viewers are likely to encounter hanging on a wall, but is typical of the vernacular forms I'm interested in. In addition to being substantially orientation-less the overhead view provides maximal information of actions of the figures. This tactic suits my content: I'm not interested in making a window to another world; I'm constructing a diagrammatic record of figures who, like myself, are engaged in a particular kind of labor.

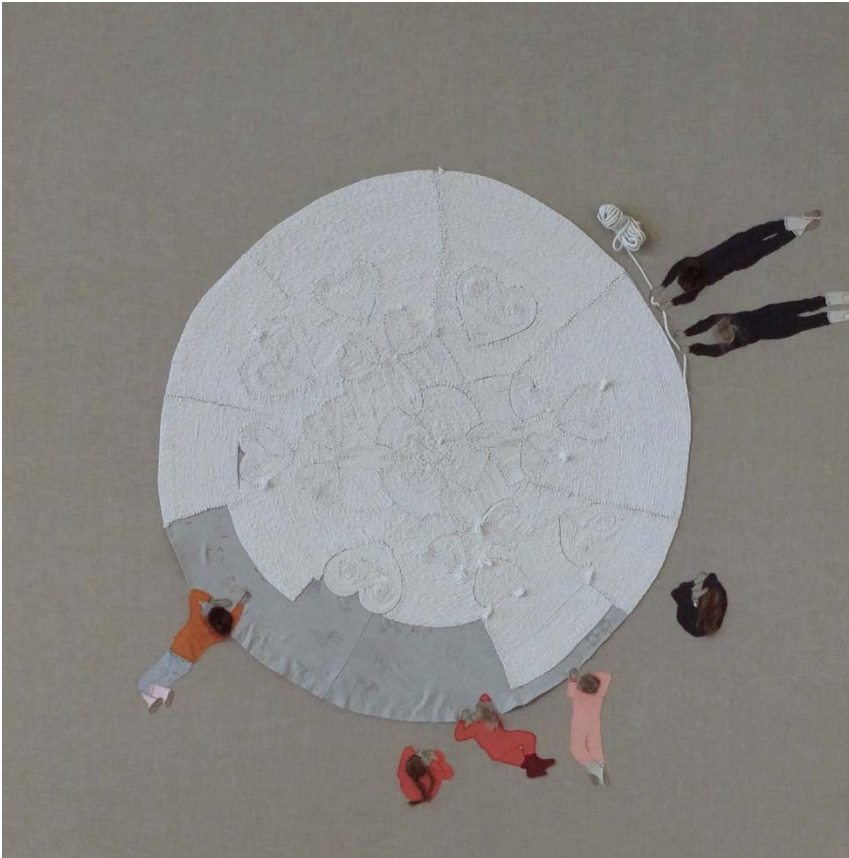


Illustration 3: *Giant rug with secret embroidery* (2017)



Illustration 4: Detail of *Giant rug with secret embroidery*, in process(2017)

Content of Work

PEOPLE WORKING

Many of the samplers depict figures working on fibers-related tasks, often primarily engaged in surface decoration. These aren't the production of fabrics for use; they're the latter (and arguably superfluous) stages of textile production. Like my figures; I'm not making the fabric itself, I'm embellishing previously created fabrics. In one piece, men, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder like old women at a quilting bee, embroider images of fish and mermaids onto a vast purple shroud.



Illustration 5: *Wunderfischen*(2017)

In several other samplers figures construct rugs. One of the rugs is so enormous that it's hard to imagine these people, who lie on their bellies hand-sewing, having a room large enough to necessitate this gigantic of a floor covering (it's unclear where they're working on it). Floor coverings are obviously a functional good, insulating a structure, but the manner in which the object is decorated is fanciful. The rug is covered in hearts and spirals that serve no utilitarian function. In addition to the fanciful appearance of the rugs, the viewer is shown an aspect of their construction-- the existence of pictorial stitching beneath the cording that forms the rugs' surface.

Where the design of the rug itself is abstract, the content of the hidden stitching is directly figurative. The people work to embroider images of disembodied hands in various positions. The hands that are stitched under the rug (hands that were ostensibly stitched by the figures of the piece, but of course in reality were stitched by me) are the same scale as the stitched hands of the figures. They are constructed in the same manner and of the same stuff, distinguishable only by the color of the fabric they're on and by their attachment to bodies (or not). Fixed in lively positions, the detached hands look animate even though their wrists are limned in red.

Making some of the stitched imagery a little biting than might be typical of embroidery on an everyday object was a bid to demonstrate urgency of the labor.

There's some play and confusion in how much figures' labor I've replicated. When I was despairing at how long it was taking, I scolded myself for being willing to assign work to the figures that I was reluctant to undertake myself. The couching on the samplers takes just as long (or longer) on the life-size mock-up that I constructed in my studio. But the soon-to-be (in terms of the narrative) hidden inscriptions beneath the cording are only done in passages that the viewer can see, my concession to expediency and the fact that I'm only one pair of hands.

But why do any of this work? This question is for both me and the tiny sewing figures. Decorating as a part of human making (and more specifically feminine making) is important enough to justify its existence in every culture regardless of its wealth or lack of it. It is not superfluous, but necessary and maybe urgent. What does it do for us? It could provide some sort of talismanic protection or power, but even after abandoning those beliefs decoration remains.

DOGS

Not all of my figures are human. Many of my pieces feature dogs. Animals are common in my pieces, but dogs hold a special place in the worlds of my work, often as proxies for people. Dogs are utterly formed both physically and socially by their relationship to humans (though many scientists now think that they descended from wolves that essentially *tamed themselves*, rather than wolves that were taken as puppies and tamed by humans). They are sharp-toothed animals living alongside us, but our primary conception of them is as loving family members or as the adorable stars of Youtube clips. My canines are always dogs-- I try to put in clues (coloring, tail carriage, head shape, etc) that they're dogs rather than wolves, but I may not be the best at phenotyping and I certainly can't expect every viewer to be! Sometimes I can let the title do some work, i.e. "Mad dog sews crazy quilt," "Dog with cache of gloves" etc.

Often the dogs I depict are pregnant or lactating, which forces us to confront their physicality and their lives as independent of us. There are very few Hallmark cards featuring As I depict them doing puzzling things that allude to the kinds of symbolic action that we understand as typical of humans, I hope to make a connection to us as animals somehow naturally formed by our relationships to other living things (and non-living things, too).

It's impossible to envision the meaningful or symbolic actions of dogs (if there are any). It's only possible to imagine in terms of our human consciousness. The kinds of behavior that constitute creature cultures might very well be invisible to humans. Any attempt to imagine a dog's "meaningful" behavior is necessarily contaminated by the human-ness of the attempt. In the piece *Dog with orderly cache of gloves* a dog has placed paired gloves in rows-- a situation that might indicate symbolic thought because putting them in *pairs* demonstrates understanding of an aspect of how they're used; the

dog is reconstituting an aspect of the glove-owners. Stealing and burying gloves (and socks and shoes etc. etc.) is an authentic and much observed dog behavior, but the idea of pairing them has got human written all over it: *the presumption of hands, and just two of them.*



Illustration 6: *Dog with cache of carefully arranged gloves*(2018)

Thomas Nagel’s famous “What is it like to be a bat?” argues for the impossibility of identifying another subject’s experience. But responses by others have argued for the possibility of objective evidence of that other’s experience. In inventing scenarios for my samplers I imagine (pathetically, inadequately) some evidence of the symbolic thought of a creature, but can only bumble through this thicket guided by an irreducibly human brain.

SURROGATES AND SWITCHES

From the very beginning of my time here at the university, the work I have made has featured many of what I think of as surrogates. The most frequent example has been the twinning of hands and gloves. Gloves are purpose-made to fit human hands and are immediately recognizable as related to our bodies. Each glove is a discrete object, but while our hands may be conceptualized as discrete, and crudely physically separated in a brutal way, they're really aspects of our continuous organism. The border defining hand from non-hand is an imagined one, an invisible political border rather than a flowing river.

In my work the hands begin to resemble the gloves: terminated at the wrists, now individual and separate from anything else. But the hands, even severed from their host, remain animate, as betrayed by their positions: clasping, pinching, balled in a fist, etc. In a series of pieces on grave goods or mortuary objects, naked legs lie beside various items; some of which are severed hands. Next to a (w)ringnecked duck, a pair of hands holds taut a reddish ligature, the hands both suggesting an act of violence, and the subject of one. Sometimes there are gloves, sometimes hands, sometimes gloves and hands, all arranged similarly suggesting a rough equivalence.



Illustration 7: *Gloves and hands*(2014)



Illustration 8: *Ring necked duck and hands with string*(2014)

The focus on an object's wholeness and separateness from others is integral to my work, a part of it I can hardly imagine wandering too far from. I always think of what I sew on the samplers as a character or an actual thing, never as a compositional element, which is why figures are never interrupted by the edge of the plane of fabric. But despite this preoccupation with wholeness and separateness, the equation of people with gloves and dogs with people confuses the categorical borders between these entities.

SENSES DURING CRISIS/CRISES IN SENSE(S)

After a nervous breakdown of sorts, I was consigned to various hospitals for an intense half year. The stressful circumstances illuminated some previously unacknowledged aspects of how I perceived the world and introduced some new variations on that, too. These hallucinatory sensations altered how I saw (and understood what I saw), how it felt to be me, and, maybe most strangely, how it felt to be other people. I have to credit the hospital staff for the basically neverending prompting to self-examine. In fact, one of the phrases etched in my brain by well-meaning staff with clipboards hungry for up-to-the-minute reports of their charges' tortured inner states was "notice and describe," the *mindful* way to respond to emotional arousal. This approach suited me fine, allowing for a clinical distance. Here are three persistent perceptual disturbances I noted, dutifully described:

1. Feelings of thing-ness: that all objects I encountered were complete, discrete, and sincerely themselves,
2. Along with a corresponding collapse of the perceived integrity of my body,
3. And also a conviction that I could feel the sensations of others.

In some ways these are symptoms and clearly pathological, but I think they are essential to my work and a possible route towards an understanding of the world as a slippery place where identities matter but aren't necessarily fixed. I would like to caution, for fear that I might end up romanticizing delusional beliefs and behavior, that while these disturbances of perception were major and compelling parts of my experience, overall my hospitalization was dominated by grinding boredom and attempts

to address the sort of common mental health issues that we are almost all at least passingly familiar with.

But when I started to become aware of some of these odd impressions, before I ended up in the hospital, they were strangely alluring, very much removed from the everyday. I would experience the feeling of thing-ness while walking alone or in times of high stress. Every object that met my eye seemed super-saturated with color and, if not purposively placed by some higher being, at least located in the very most fitting spot for it. I might see a mailbox and be taken with its self-possession, inwardly marveling that it wasn't either an inch to the left or an inch to the right. Not that it was conscious or animate, just that it was just perfectly itself in an inexpressible way. Sometimes people describe an analogous sensation as "feeling as though you were in a movie," because everything looks and feels as if it had been contrived.

The problem with the feeling of thing-ness was that it started to apply to my body . I had a sense that pieces (I mean parts!) of my body, ones like hands and feet that I could easily see without the use of a mirror, were not my own and were biological specimens to which I owed no particular loyalty. I labored under the somewhat psychotic premise that several of my fingers should be separated from my body, that they didn't necessarily belong. I must have thought that I was a chimera made up of disparate parts, an exquisite corpse.

By this time I was alternately subject to brief episodes that sometimes made me feel continuous with others. I was experiencing the sensations of other people, and while this may have been the most harmless of my delusions, it was the one that really bewildered me. If someone I was talking to casually touched their face, I might feel it on my face. If they nervously rubbed their hands, *my* hands would tingle. Certain colors, like the orange panes of sunlight cast on a wall during golden hour, would give me the

same sensation. After confessing to this odd delusion, I found out that it is a relatively common experience related to ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response), which, due to the internet and its infinite menu of videos designed to stimulate this sense, has quickly become a term heard frequently in a variety of contexts.

I talked to a woman who was only aware of experiencing an ASMR response when people stroked her dog. Her skin would tingle. My hospital discharge records noted pragmatically that maybe this sense of overlapping with other people could serve as a shortcut to an empathetic connection.

While I was stuck in the hospital I continued to make drawings, including several about the abovementioned sensations. Some of my samplers were brought to me but the staff and doctors kept them from me (of course I couldn't work on them because of scissors, needles, and string; but even the finished samplers themselves were initially confiscated at each hospital I eventually stayed at). There was some confusion as to whether the pieces that I had made had possessed me and were compelling a psychotic response, or whether the things I had made were expressions of delusional thinking. They became evidence for a while, hidden in a paper bag in a locked room. I found them when a timid resident M.D. let me rummage through a bag I noticed that was labeled with my name. It was frustrating to have samplers (just pieces of cloth!) taken from me, but simultaneously oddly funny and even satisfying, as if I had somehow made objects that were so powerful that they could control human behavior.

Following this extended episode, I started to make work that was more self-reflexive than previously-- work that depicted people laboring to make objects that seemed to have the same power that my samplers had been alleged by doctors to have.



Illustration 9: *Dog at midden*(2018)



Illustration 10: *Woman cording rug with secret embroidery*(2017)

Conclusion

Much of the content of my work derives from my experience as someone whose experience of the world encompasses both an overwhelming sense of the essential integrity (and self-contained-ness) of objects and living things alongside sensations that seem to dissolve those boundaries and make them negotiable. Slipperiness in this arena forces us to question our borders: how we categorize our self, others, even other creatures and the material world.

If the borders are porous between myself and the materials I touch, maybe all the touching and cutting and piercing involved slips through my fingers and animates my work. The figures and bodies, creatures and things, the samplers themselves flip back and forth from patient dumbness to living object. But if the claim to being some sort of Frankenstein patching together and animating a colony of sewn bodies seems too grandiose, viewer, ignore it and circle back to their mundane activities: dogs digging in holes full of cast-off old clothing, girls endlessly adorning a mat with looping hearts and circles that could have been pulled from any school kid's notebook.



Illustration 11: *Mad dog sews crazy quilt*, studio view(2017)

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